

NATO's Misguided Missiles

New Strategic Weapons Should Not Be Used as Bargaining Chips for SALT

By HERBERT SCOVILLE JR.

The nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are being pressured by the United States to decide at their ministerial meetings on Dec. 13 to deploy a total of 572 long-range strategic cruise and Pershing ballistic missiles in Western Europe.

One of the arguments being made to support an early decision is that a firm deployment program is needed as a bargaining chip for future negotiations with the Soviet Union on limiting theater nuclear weapons.

The United States and other NATO governments are now developing a negotiating approach to controlling theater nuclear weapons in the SALT III context. The new strategic missiles are viewed as bargaining chips for these negotiations. But SALT III could be many years away.

SALT II ratification is in serious trouble; even if the strategic arms limitation treaty were to be ratified, there are many difficult problems that must be resolved before concrete SALT III negotiations can even begin, much less reach actual results. Many other issues besides theater nuclear weapons will be on the agenda. The experience of SALT II does not provide much basis for optimism for rapid negotiated arms reduction.

On Oct. 6, 1979, in a speech in East Berlin, Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev offered "to unilaterally reduce the number of medium-range nuclear rockets stationed in the Western part of the U.S.S.R. compared with the present level, provided there is no additional deployment of medium-range nuclear weapons in Western Europe."

This proposal has some interesting features largely ignored in the United States:

—It offers unilateral Soviet reduction without requiring parallel reductions on the part of the West. In the past, Soviet restraint in Europe has always been linked to similar restrictions on U.S. forward-based systems—i.e.,

nuclear weapons located in Europe or on ships and capable of hitting targets in the Soviet Union. Now the West is being asked only to forgo additional deployment.

—It refers to reductions below the "present level," presumably that existing at the time of Brezhnev's speech. While such statements should not be accepted at face value without investigation of specifics, it is hard to see how Western security would not be enhanced if such an offer were put into effect.

If, however, the decision to deploy the new long-range Pershing ballistic missiles and the cruise missiles is made in December, the Soviet Union will almost certainly continue, and perhaps speed up, its deployment of new intermediate-range SS-20 ballistic missiles. It will probably not phase out its older SS-4 and SS-5 medium- and intermediate-range missiles. Since no significant deployment of the new NATO missiles can occur for about five years, the West will move into an increasingly poor bargaining position.

If and when the SALT III negotiations address these weapons seriously, the Soviets can have more than twice the number of SS-20 missiles, and NATO will still be where it is today. To get them below the levels that they have now will be a much more difficult task. The argument that a deployment decision today will improve the chances of getting meaningful cutbacks in Soviet missile deployment tomorrow is clearly misleading.

Instead, NATO should defer its decision on the deployment of the new long-range theater weapons, and request from the Soviet Union specifics of what it is prepared to undertake in the way of reductions now, not five or ten years from now. The decision to deploy is the real bargaining chip, and it should not be played prematurely, since this would merely raise the stakes in the negotiations:

The timing of the Brezhnev offer and the recent widespread Soviet campaign throughout Europe against the new missile deploy-

ments is a graphic demonstration of the importance that this decision has in Soviet thinking. The West should take advantage of this situation, and not throw the decision casually under the negotiating table.

Moreover, there is everything to gain and nothing to be lost by withholding the decision now. There is no military requirement for a current commitment to deployment, since this cannot begin for at least three years. However, once the decision is made, the program will acquire a momentum that will make future limitations more difficult.

The protocol of SALT II specifically bans the deployment of cruise missiles until the end of 1981, and the Administration has argued that this ban has no effect on the cruise-missile development program. If it appears that the Soviet Union is dragging its feet or is unprepared to make significant reductions, a deployment decision can still be made without affecting program schedules. A decision now, however, could mean an opportunity permanently lost.

Exploratory discussions with the Soviet Union need not wait for SALT II ratification. There would be no need for prolonged negotiations, since the issues are now and confined almost entirely to verifiable unilateral Soviet actions. If they would halt now their European SS-20 deployment at a level of fewer than 100 missiles and simultaneously discard some of their 600 old but large SS-4 and SS-5 missiles in exchange for a simple commitment not to deploy the yet-to-be-developed U.S. long-range cruise and Pershing ballistic missiles, the West would be far better off than if the Soviets were to continue their current programs. The Soviets have offered restraint. Let's call them on their offer, and see if they are serious.

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